DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Meeting Notes

School Social Worker Listening Session
February 18, 2011
1:30-3:30 p.m.
Office of the State Superintendent of Education

Overview:

This meeting was convened to gain the input of DCPS social workers (school-based and special education) on how to make our schools safe, inclusive and welcoming learning environments for all. The input gathered will contribute to the development of a comprehensive plan for supporting the DCPS LGBTQ community of students, staff and families. A newly formed LGBTQ Steering Committee of students, school administration and staff, parents and community experts is guiding the Central Office staff in the development and implementation of this plan.

Attendance: 22 DCPS social workers

Notes:

Issue	Comments
Purpose, goals and expectations	The DCPS Central Office is developing a comprehensive plan for supporting the DCPS LGBTQ community of students, staff and families. This listening session was convened to gain the input of social workers to guide the implementation of this plan.
Review of listening session and other data	Data were gathered through: a listening session with DCPS administrators, students, teachers, social workers, other school based staff, and central office staff; a listening session with LGBTQ parents; and feedback from school-based staff through sexual health, capacity building activities. Based on this research, we found that most schools have a culture of tolerance, and many adults and students in our school building are open and affirming. However, there are several key areas for improvement: **Improving Skills and Knowledge of School-based Staff:** • bullying needs to be addressed • staff should be consistent in modeling appropriate and tolerant behavior, with both staff and students • administrators should support student empowerment and awareness-

building programming
- trainings needed for staff and administrators on appropriate and inclusive language
- need simple and clear interpretations of the policies to share with the school community
- vital to gain the support and investment of administrators

Promoting Positive School Culture:
- sharing information and resources within and between schools is essential
- important to reach and empower students creatively for advice and support
- implement programming that focuses specifically on expanding cultural competence
- curbing offensive, disparaging and intolerant language in the hallways and in the classrooms by both students and staff
- adequately training staff to address behaviors and support open dialogue in the classroom in a developmentally-appropriate way
- encourage students to monitor their peers' speech, and model that behavior in all situations
- visual clues and reminders of LGBTQ acceptance are also important
- prominently posting information on LGBTQ historical events, leaders, media, and celebration days

Creating an Inclusive Work Environment:
- LGBTQ staff are often not comfortable being "out" in schools
- gender role issues are often not addressed
- disparaging remarks sometimes made about LGBTQ staff or families
- Important to have culturally competent and inclusive books, places, and materials are to making the built environment safer-even something as simple as designating a unisex bathroom-in tandem with proper awareness and education-may help

Welcoming All Families:
- school community needs to know the resources that are available
- families feel welcome when schools are mindful of their language, when schools are intentional about their diversity, when participation in the classroom is welcomed publically, when curricula include representing LGBTQ families, when the library and classrooms have inclusive materials
- family engagement is very important as students listen to their families, emulate their parents

Linking Schools and Communities:
- build awareness of within school community of appropriate resources and

	• foster those relationships • staff need to know how and where to make appropriate referrals • important to allow for information sharing among school staff to share successes and challenges
Family Acceptance Project data	DCPS presented the Family Acceptance Project Data to the social workers. According to the Family Acceptance Project at San Francisco State University, which studies how the reactions of families may affect their LGBT children, the health and wellness of LBGT youth should be addressed through the context of their families and not solely based on their individual circumstances or in the context of their peers (Ryan et al., 2010). When families accept their LGBT children - support their gender expression, proactively defend them against bullies, and express affection when their child comes out to them - the positive effects on the health and wellness of their youth are profound. These "family accepting behaviors" by parents, caregivers, or guardians of LGBT youth help protect youth against risky behaviors including suicide, depression, and substance abuse. These behaviors are also reflected in higher levels of self-esteem, health, and social support for those LGBT youth (Ryan et al., 2010) Even a slight increase in accepting behaviors or decrease in rejecting behaviors- can make important strides in decreasing the youth's risks for serious health problems such as suicide or HIV (Ryan et al., 2009).
Gallery Walk	For each subtopic, social workers worked in pairs to develop their recommendations. They then reported their recommendations back to the group: *Improving Skills and Knowledge of School-Based Staff:* • As always, we heard that professional development is important, should be normalized, and should include anti-gay bullying workshops, the importance of being more LGBTQ friendly as a school and sensitivity training • Staff expressed the importance of administration being on board and made aware of individual student, staff and family needs. • Use departmental and collaborative meetings as times to express commitment to this work as well as work through trainings, as a safe space and forum for staff to express their needs and frustrations, and to share what works. *Promoting Positive School Culture:* • We also heard from the social workers how effective the implementation

	of designated weeks and days at the school level can be.
	• We heard again that principals need to be allies, and that staff need to address insensitive comments and inappropriate language by anyone in the community when heard in the school building.
	• There needs to be consistency in trainings/messaging.
	Creating an Inclusive Work Environment:
	• LGBT staff must feel safe, and to do that the school-based staff and administration need to be educated on creating a safe space.
	• Clear behavioral expectations are needed for everyone in the school, and they should be stressed at the administrative level.
	• Team-building events should be important at the schools to foster general open dialogue.
	Welcoming all Families:
	• At the school level, offer family workshops, support groups, get-togethers, etc. These should be planned in collaboration with staff and families from the school itself in order to make it relevant.
	• There should be a newsletter, blog etc. at every school, and they should include any educational or policy information.
	• Families should be included in school plans, including trainings.
	Linking Schools and Communities:
	• Staff must be trained on resources available, and resources should be included in all parent information tables, mailings, etc. They should also be made available online.
	• We have a lot of great resources in DC-including community collaboratives in most neighborhoods-and we need to use them.
Next Steps	This listening session data will be presented at the next meeting of the LGBTQ steering committee on February 23, 2011 for incorporation into the overall plan.
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